

Opportunities through State Agency Research Partnerships for Using Administrative Data to Support Early Care and Education



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Opportunities through State Agency Research Partnerships for Using Administrative Data to Support Early Care and Education

This report describes partnerships between researchers and state early childhood agencies in Georgia, Oregon, and South Carolina. Two of these partnerships are with researchers who are external to the state agency, and one is with a research team inside the agency. The report provides examples of how partnerships have made use of administrative data to address various questions about pre-K, child care quality, access, child care subsidy, and other topics of interest to states. Examples of questions addressed in this report include the following: What is the reliability among licensing staff who monitor compliance with licensing? Where can the state add child care slots to serve homeless children who are not receiving child care? In this report, members of the research partnerships describe the benefits and challenges of these partnerships and offer tips for sustaining the partnerships. Research partners note that sustaining these partnerships requires frequent communication; a commitment to addressing critical, policy-relevant questions; and trust among all partners.

Introduction

Partnerships between state agency staff¹ and researchers can be mutually beneficial. They can yield research findings that help the agency strengthen its services and help the field better understand policy issues related to early care and education. Most of these partnerships analyze administrative data to address questions of joint interest. We use the term *administrative data* to refer to information about individual children, families, and/or service providers that is collected and maintained as a part of regular program operations. These partnerships can be beneficial to state agency staff who may not have the time or expertise needed to analyze the administrative data to address important questions. Researchers benefit from the partnership because they learn more about the policy context of particular issues and gain access to administrative data that is often necessary to answer policy-relevant research questions.

¹ In this resource, we use the term *agency staff* to include administrators, program staff, data managers, and other data stewards.

The Child Care Administrative Data Analysis Center (CCADAC) has developed four other resources to support the use of administrative data in research. The first resource, *Developing Collaborative Partnerships with State Agencies to Strengthen Research Using Early Care and Education Administrative Data*, provides considerations for building a strong research partnership between researchers and state partners who oversee the administrative data (Maxwell & Lin, 2017). The second, *Determining the Feasibility of Using State Early Care and Education Administrative Data*, helps researchers and their state partners determine whether analyzing administrative data is appropriate for addressing their child care and early education research questions, and explores the feasibility of accessing and using administrative data (Lin, Maxwell, & Forry, 2017a). The third resource, *Considerations in Preparing to Analyze Administrative Data to Address Early Care and Education Related Research Questions*, helps researchers prepare for issues that might arise when using administrative data in a research project (Lin, Maxwell, & Forry, 2017b). The fourth resource, *Early Childhood Data Definitions: A Guide for Researchers Using Administrative Data*, summarizes existing resources that can help researchers define administrative data variables (King & Maxwell, 2017).

This resource was developed as part of the Child Care Administrative Data Analysis Center (CCADAC) through the Child Care and Early Education Policy and Research Analysis contract at Child Trends. The work is funded by the Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, with funds set aside for research in the Child Care and Development Block Grant Act. CCADAC works to strengthen the ability of state/territory child care administrators and their research partners to utilize administrative data to address policy-relevant early care and education research questions.

The purpose of this resource is to describe examples of state agency-research partnerships to demonstrate the opportunities possible through such partnerships. We describe three state agency-research partnerships, from Georgia, Oregon, and South Carolina. We interviewed a researcher and state agency staff member from each partnership to learn more about the partnerships themselves (e.g., who was included, how they worked, etc.), the kinds of research questions addressed, and lessons learned to share with others who might be interested in developing similar partnerships. The team selected these three states to showcase different types of partnerships and the variety of research questions that have been addressed using administrative data.

Types of Partnerships

State-research partnerships fall into two broad categories: external and internal. This resource highlights two examples of external partnerships (Oregon and South Carolina) and one example of an internal partnership (Georgia).

External partnerships include those between a state agency and researchers outside of the agency (e.g., universities, independent research organizations). Given that these partnerships may involve a wide range of partners, each may look different.

The partnership in Oregon includes state agencies, universities, and practitioners. Key partners include faculty from Oregon State University and staff from the Oregon Department of Education Early Learning Division. The partnership is based on a shared commitment to use research and data to inform child care decisions. This partnership began in 1987, prior to the Child Care and Development Block Grant, with a group of individuals trying to answer policy-relevant questions about child care. The state had new data on child care supply, and the group saw this data as an opportunity to leverage resources to better understand child care use in the state. (For more information about external research partnerships, as well as the Oregon child care partnership, see Weber & Wolfe, 2002.)

Oregon Spotlight

The Oregon Child Care Research Partnership (OCCRP) launched in 1987 to answer questions about the availability of child care and establish methods for collecting data about Oregon's child care system. The Oregon legislature and state and national agencies have used findings from the research partnership, particularly around child care subsidies, to change policy to improve early childhood programs and outcomes at the state and federal levels. For example, the OCCRP examined continuity of care for Oregon families receiving child care subsidies by calculating the length of time a child received a subsidy (sometimes known as a "subsidy spell"). They found that families would leave the subsidy program after a short subsidy spell of three months, primarily exiting the program when recertification occurred. The findings from this effort to understand the stability of families' participation in the child care subsidy program eventually informed national policy outlined in the 2014 Child Care and Development Block Grant Reauthorization Act. This policy change resulted in a 12-month redetermination period for families receiving a child care subsidy to reduce disruption in parents' care arrangements and ability to work.

In another instance, the state agency has used findings about the supply and cost of child care to educate state legislators about the complexity of the child care system. Similarly, the OCCRP has provided estimates of the percentage of eligible children who receive child care subsidies, which has helped inform department and legislative discussions about subsidy allocations. Data from the partnership have also been helpful in establishing the need for additional regulators in the child care licensing system.

The partnership in South Carolina primarily includes staff from the Early Care and Education Division in the Department of Social Services, and researchers from the University of South Carolina (USC), but other agencies and universities have been involved depending on the research question being answered. The partnership began about 10 years ago when USC researchers expressed interest in establishing a research partnership and identified federal funds to support the initial work. The state agency leader and research partner both recognized that the partnership would need to be built over time, and that additional funds would be important to support its start-up.

South Carolina Spotlight

The South Carolina research partnership began in 2007 with a child care research capacity grant from the federal Administration for Children and Families to leverage data resources by adding child care data to South Carolina's Data Warehouse. This would allow child care data to be linked to other data from health care, education, the justice system, and other sectors. After the grant period ended, the research team transitioned to administering the state's Child Care Resource and Referral system and regularly responding to requests from the state Department of Social Services (DSS) to analyze data from the warehouse.

While there are some statewide standardized reports and systems, legislators or department leaders often ask questions that can't be answered by the standardized reports and require additional data analysis. Because the research team is familiar with the early childhood data, DSS often consults the team when responding to requests. For example, the department received an external request to identify the percentage of nonprofit licensed programs that have a religious affiliation and asked the research team for guidance about how to address the question. The department's standard reports on child care programs did not indicate whether programs are religiously affiliated. The research team recommended strategies for combining information from two data elements to provide the requested information.

Agency staff also work with the research team to answer questions to improve early childhood programs. For instance, agency staff were interested in determining the areas of the state with low access to child care services. The partnership developed a research plan and acquired federal funds to create a Child Care Accessibility Index to be used by policymakers.

Internal partnerships, like Georgia's, are those between program staff and researchers within the same agency. The Georgia research partnership began with the hire of one internal researcher in 2005 in the division that later became Bright from the Start: Department of Early Care and Learning (DECAL). As the agency grew, the research team expanded to meet its research needs. The original purpose of the research unit was to strengthen the agency's research focus. The unit supports the collection of administrative data, analyzes data, develops and implements studies that require new data collection, and oversees larger research projects conducted by external researchers.

Georgia Spotlight

Much of the early work of the Georgia internal research unit focused on Georgia's Pre-K, a universal program for four-year-olds operated by the Department of Early Care and Learning (DECAL). As the program grew, pre-K leaders turned to the research team for help in determining need and identifying geographic areas to target pre-K expansion. The research team used multiple sources of data to identify counties to prioritize for pre-K expansion. For instance, the team used the waitlist and enrollment data from local pre-K programs, Department of Education third-grade reading scores, poverty rates from the Census Bureau, and low birthrate data from the state public health agency to develop a weighted formula to calculate need. Over the years, the research team refined the formula and supported pre-K program staff in expanding their use of data and improving their understanding of how best to use data to determine which counties to prioritize for pre-K expansion. The research unit developed a similar approach to using data to identify priority areas to implement other early childhood programs, such as infant-toddler language and literacy grants.

The research team was also instrumental in raising awareness of the importance of inter-rater agreement in the collection of program data. For several years, the DECAL staff who monitored Georgia's pre-K classrooms used an agency-developed instrument to measure classroom quality. When the research team examined the data across consultants, they noticed wide variation among consultants and helped the pre-K team conduct a small study of inter-rater agreement, sending two consultants to rate the same classrooms at the same time. The findings suggested that consultants had difficulty using the instrument consistently, and the pre-K team decided to move to a commercially available measure of quality that had training materials and predetermined inter-rater agreement criteria. The research team has also helped the licensing and Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS) units gather and review data on inter-rater agreement among their staff.

Uses of Administrative Data

Researchers from all three research partnerships reported that more than 75 percent of partnership work uses state administrative data. This section highlights the types of research questions that are answered by the research partners and explains how research questions are determined. Finally, we detail other ways in which partnerships use state administrative data.

Types of research questions answered by the research partnerships using administrative data

In Oregon, the research partnership began when data on the supply of child care programs became available via a newly created Child Care Resource and Referral system. They sought to answer four main questions: 1) How much child care was needed (demand)? 2) How much child care did Oregon have (supply)? 3) What is the quality of Oregon's child care? and 4) How affordable is this child care? Over time, the research partnership continued to answer these four questions, although the particular data sources used have changed over time. As noted on their research agenda, the partnership now addresses a broader set of research topics as the state Office of Child Care's scope and number of programs have expanded. The current research agenda includes such topics as identifying appropriate outcomes for the Child Care

Resource and Referral system, conducting child care subsidy program research and child care market rate studies, determining quality of care, and identifying the role of parents in selecting and using child care (Oregon Child Care Research Partnership [OCCRP] Research Activities, n.d.). While the questions about child care supply, demand, affordability, and quality remain priorities, there is now a stronger emphasis on understanding racial equity issues within these research questions.

The research partnership in South Carolina began with an Administration for Children and Families (ACF) grant to fund a project to develop an early childhood database as part of the South Carolina Data Warehouse. The warehouse allowed staff from licensing, child care subsidy, quality, and resource and referral to share data and answer questions across these programs. By bringing together a variety of previously disconnected datasets, the research partnership has been able to answer more policy-relevant questions of interest. For example, it has addressed questions about access to child care for certain populations (e.g., homeless). The research partnership members also participate in a statewide data team that involves staff from multiple state departments (e.g., Department of Mental Health, Department of Corrections, Department of Juvenile Justice,) to better understand the range of available state administrative data and discuss the various ways agencies use this data.

The internal research team in Georgia began by hiring one researcher to assist in the development of a QRIS. However, the research partnership quickly moved into answering questions about pre-K because the governor at the time (and subsequent governors) had a strong interest in pre-K. As DECAL expanded, the types of research questions and the research needs also expanded, which led to an expansion of the research unit. More researchers, who bring different skills (e.g., quantitative analysis, survey development), allow the agency to address a broader range of questions. The federal and state policy context also shapes the types of questions asked. For instance, the federal Race to the Top – Early Learning Challenge (ELC) funds emphasized meeting the needs of high-needs children, so the research partnership in Georgia refined its research questions to include these children as a specific research population and include new research questions to address the grant’s priorities. The current governor is interested in the QRIS and in supporting language and pre-literacy skills in infants and toddlers, so the programs and research agenda have shifted to match these interests. In general, the DECAL team addresses questions across multiple topics, such as early care and education quality, access to child care, pre-K, licensing, and the workforce.

Box A includes examples of research questions addressed by the partnerships in Georgia, Oregon, and South Carolina. Teams have used a wide range of data to answer their questions of interest, including data from child care licensing, QRIS, pre-K, teacher registries, and child care subsidies.

Box A: Examples of Research Questions Addressed by the Partnerships

Early care and education quality

- What is the quality of child care?
- Is the state's QRIS valid? Does the QRIS differentiate quality in child care programs?
- What is the impact of making changes to the infant-toddler requirements in the QRIS? Do programs serving infants and toddlers, for example, receive a lower rating? Do these programs stop participating in QRIS?

Child care access

- What is the supply of and demand for child care?
- What is the affordability of child care?
- What is the continuity of care for parents using subsidies? What contributes to families' frequent entrance and exit from the child care subsidy system?
- Where can the state add child care slots to serve homeless children who are not receiving child care?
- What contributes to differences in supply and utilization of child care across counties?

Pre-K

- What is the inter-rater reliability among pre-K consultants in using a quality measure tool?
- How can the state define an "at-risk" family to be eligible for pre-K programs?
- Based on need, where can the state fund additional pre-K classrooms?

Workforce

- What are the credentials of the early care and education workforce?
- What professional development and training does the early care and education workforce receive?
- What is the nature of caregiver-child interactions in pre-K programs?

Licensing

- How valid are compliance processes?
- What is the reliability among licensing staff who monitor compliance with licensing?
- Are there regional differences in licensing by setting (e.g., rural vs. urban differences in compliance for family child care or child care centers)?

How research questions are determined by the research partnerships

When asked how research questions are determined and prioritized, all three research partnerships recognized the state agency as the ultimate driver of the research questions because the work will impact programs and families statewide. Researchers in the partnerships prioritized the needs of the state agency. At the same time, partnership members noted that the questions were developed and refined by both researchers and program staff. Agency staff may express an interest in or need for information that could improve their programs, and the research team offers strategies for how best to use administrative data to answer questions. Researchers may also listen when agency staff discuss issues, and then offer suggestions on using administrative data to inform the discussion. At other times, the research staff may see the early childhood field moving in a particular direction and offer suggestions for research topics that they could answer to inform the state's work and contribute to the field at large. Partnership members also noted the influence of external factors in determining questions. For example, research questions might come from a legislative requirement or new federal regulation. Regardless of how research questions are introduced, each side of the partnership expressed its dedication to open, frequent communication and collaboration before finalizing the research question.

Other uses of administrative data

The partnerships reported using administrative data for a variety of other activities, in addition to research. They use administrative data for regular reporting to the state or federal government. This may include identifying data to be included on federal reports, developing an early care and education data dashboard, creating an online report about the state's child care system, or providing a monthly map of the geographical distribution of programs participating in the state QRIS. Partnerships also report using administrative data to respond to ad-hoc requests from entities outside of the research partnership. For example, state legislatures, advocacy groups, the governor's office, or external research partners may request data about programs. These external requests might require researchers to help agency staff identify publicly available information to share, analyze agency data to provide the requested information, or help merge data from multiple datasets (either within an agency or across different agencies) to answer a question.

The partnerships have also facilitated changes in the administrative data collected by the state agencies. In one instance, a state needed to determine information to collect about families whose children participated in a summer pre-K transition program. Because the population served in the summer transition program differed from the regular pre-K program, the state needed to collect different information from families than what it typically collected in its pre-K program. The research team helped agency staff determine the information needed and identify how best to collect the information from families. In another instance, researchers suggested that agency staff routinely collect some data about families served in a particular program to help them better understand these families. The researchers helped the agency identify information, develop procedures for collecting it, and add data elements to their existing administrative datasets. Partnerships have also worked together to determine which administrative data elements would best answer questions of interest. For example, when a new dataset became available in one state, agency staff asked the research team to determine whether any new data could be used to answer questions about the program, and whether the new data could replace older data elements in their data system.

Other Partnership Activities

This report focuses on the use of state-level administrative data, so most interview questions asked about research activities related to administrative data. Partnerships reported other research activities, though, which are described in this section. Researchers conducted studies that required the collection of new data about information not routinely gathered by the state. For instance, they gathered information from provider surveys to understand providers' motivations to participate in quality improvement activities. Others interviewed families to better understand their experiences using child care subsidies. Information on motivation, perspectives, and experiences can be difficult to gather and include in administrative datasets, but may be useful to collect periodically to inform programs and policies. Researchers in these partnerships noted the usefulness of combining administrative data with other data collected by the team (e.g., interviews, surveys) to answer specific questions. For example, researchers in Oregon conducted a multi-method study using a combination of administrative data and telephone interviews with families. In Georgia, researchers used administrative data to identify providers participating in the child care subsidy system whom they wanted to survey. Leveraging administrative data to conduct new research can reduce study costs and time needed to sample programs, providers, or families and collect new data.

Research partnerships in each state helped coordinate research efforts and identify new research needed to guide the state's early childhood policy agenda. In Georgia, researchers meet regularly to manage current research conducted by internal and external researchers. In South Carolina, research team members regularly attend agency meetings to understand agency priorities. These regular discussions help members identify possible future research needs to discuss with agency staff. Researchers also discuss research findings with agency staff and help them consider the implications of these findings for the program and future research. In Oregon, an annual researchers' roundtable provides a public forum for policymakers, researchers, and practitioners to discuss current research on critical early childhood policy issues (Oregon

Child Care Research Partnership [OCCRP], n.d.). In 2016, for example, the roundtable participants discussed findings and challenges in measuring program quality and professional development needs across different early childhood settings, which resulted in the successful engagement of the broader policy and research community in efforts to improve early childhood services.

Sustaining a Partnership

Sustaining a research partnership requires a strong commitment from its partners, open communication, and sufficient resources to conduct and translate research. Strong commitment requires that researchers and state agency staff build trust and see value in the partnership's work. For example, researchers should feel that their expertise is needed and that they can meaningfully contribute to the research partnership's goals. Agency staff must trust that their data will be used appropriately and benefit the families and children served. To build these strong relationships, each partnership scheduled meetings to support ongoing communication and provide opportunities to work collaboratively on current goals and planning. In South Carolina, for example, researchers often attend agency staff meetings to better understand the program needs and consider how to provide data to inform decisions. Staff in all three partnerships reported that the quality and value of the relationships were important to the partnerships' success and longevity. Partnership members noted that the commitment to maintaining the research partnerships continued, even with changing funding support, because the knowledge gained was useful to all partners involved.

For more information about sustaining research partnerships, see *Creating Research that Informs State Child Care Policy: Building and Maintaining Child Care Research Partnerships* (Weber & Wolfe, 2002).

Each partnership reported using several types of funding to sustain research activities over the life of the partnership. Oregon's partnership, the longest-running partnership included in this report, described the greatest number of funding sources. Since 1987, the research partnership has been supported with funds from CCDF, federal research grants, foundations, and corporations. In particular, partnership universities have received federal grants from ACF throughout the partnership's duration for various research activities, such as building state research capacity or establishing strong research partnerships with the state.

South Carolina's research team is primarily supported through the university's grant from the Department of Social Services to manage the statewide Child Care Resource and Referral Network; the state uses CCDF funds for this grant. The research team has also sought additional funding to answer specific research questions of interest. For example, the research partnership was originally funded through the Child Care State Research Capacity Cooperative Agreement grant from ACF to add child care data to the state's data warehouse, and part of the partnership's current research agenda is funded by a Secondary Analyses of Data on Child Care and Early Education grant from ACF to understand access to child care.

Georgia's internal research team is funded through multiple sources as part of various early childhood programs and initiatives. For instance, the work around improving child care quality has been funded through a Race to the Top Early Learning Challenge grant from 2014 to 2018, whereas work around pre-K is funded by state pre-K dollars and state general dollars. In addition to funds from CCDF, research on child care subsidies is funded through the Phase I Child Care and Development Block Grant Implementation Research and Evaluation Planning grant from ACF.

These partnerships reported using various sources of federal funds to support their research. Sources included federal research grants like the ones available from ACF, and other federal grants like the Early Learning Challenge grant. States also chose to use federal CCDF block grant funds to support the research.

Using CCDF to Support Research and Evaluation

In 2005, the Office of Child Care (OCC) provided guidance on how states, territories, and tribes can use CCDF funds for research purposes to improve child care assistance services (Regulations Regarding Use of CCDF Funds for Research and Evaluation, ACYF-PI-CC-05-02, 2005). CCDF represents a mix of mandatory and discretionary federal and state funding administered by states to provide access to child care services for low-income working and other eligible families. States, territories, and tribes may use CCDF funds for research and evaluation purposes. Costs associated with research and evaluation may be considered administrative, non-direct (non-administrative), or quality expenditures depending on the nature of the study and, to some extent, grantee preference.

For more information about using CCDF for research activities, child care administrators can contact their regional program manager.

Benefits and Challenges of Research Partnerships

There are several benefits and challenges to maintaining research partnerships. From the state agency perspective, the biggest challenges involve researchers understanding the data. State agency staff reported that researchers did not always understand the administrative data well enough to realize that the data cannot answer the question of interest. Agency staff underscored the importance of researchers working closely with them throughout the research process, from developing research questions and analysis plans to interpreting findings. Even when researchers are internal to the organization, agency staff may have a richer understanding of the data and are critical partners in determining how to use the data appropriately. With research partnerships that have existed for multiple years, some requests for information may be directed toward the research team first, rather than to the program; this may be particularly the case when researchers are internal to the organization. It is important to determine roles and responsibilities in these instances and to work collaboratively to determine how best to respond to requests for information from individuals outside of the program.

Researchers also reported challenges in developing and sustaining these partnerships. Communication was one such common challenge. Researchers who were external to the state agency noted challenges in communicating with both agency partners and their research organizations. Communication can be especially challenging when there is turnover in state agency staff because new members may not be aware of the partnership and its accomplishments, or may not value the partnership as much as previous staff. Some researchers also noted challenges in conveying the importance to their research colleagues of conducting research in the context of a partnership, and in explaining the amount of time needed for such a partnership—particularly when the use of administrative data for research is relatively uncommon in the research organization.

Researchers who are part of the state agency face challenges in managing competing priorities because they are being asked to become involved in many projects. They also may not have the methodological or statistical expertise necessary to complete all research requests; contracting with external researchers may be needed for some projects. Additionally, it may be more difficult for internal researchers to share their work widely in the field through publications in peer-reviewed journals because the agency does not incentivize publication in the way that other research organizations or universities might.

Despite the challenges, agency staff and researchers noted several benefits to these research partnerships. State agency staff appreciated the opportunity to think through policy-relevant research questions and rely on the expertise of researchers to help answer difficult questions. Researchers were helpful in noting how their administrative data could inform agency discussions. The partnerships also provide agency staff with data about how their programs operate.

Agency staff with access to researchers within their organization identified multiple benefits to partnerships. First, they recognize that having a team within the department allows agency staff to easily and quickly receive research support. Second, an internal research team allows agency staff to have an objective partner when trying to understand how programs are functioning. Third, the research team can mentor agency staff in understanding the research process and how to use and interpret data, which can build the research capacity of the organization over time. Finally, the team has easy access to data to support data-driven decisions about improving programs. Although these benefits were noted specifically for internal research partnerships, many may also be possible through partnerships with external researchers.

Cost was mentioned as another possible benefit for agencies that employ researchers. If an agency is actively involved in multiple research tasks over time, then it may be less expensive to hire a researcher as an agency employee. It is difficult, though, to declare one option more cost-effective than another because the cost depends on several factors, including the research interests of the agency, the extent to which administrative data can be used (vs. the need for new data collection efforts), and the availability of grant funds.

Researchers noted several benefits as well, including the ability to shape policy and contribute to work that will make a difference. In South Carolina, building the research capacity of doctoral students has been an important benefit of the research partnership. Administrative data are not often used by early childhood doctoral students, so the partnership allows opportunities for graduate students to understand aspects of analyzing administrative data and strengthen their quantitative analysis skills. Researchers also reported the benefits to them of developing an understanding of how programs are implemented, and learning how political and other forces influence program implementation. This improved understanding of implementation helps researchers strengthen and refine their research.

Lessons Learned in Developing Research Partnerships

For those interested in building similar research partnerships, state agency members and researchers offered advice about building a strong partnership. Some advice applied more to researchers or state agency staff, while other lessons were applicable to both sides.

The understanding that everyone in the partnership offers expertise was an important piece of advice offered to researchers. Researchers who are new to such partnerships may overlook the value of agency staff expertise. While researchers can offer insight into the research process and the analytic methods best able to answer research questions, agency staff provide the necessary context about the meaning of the data and how to use and interpret state administrative data. Both are needed for the success of a research project. Further, both researchers and agency staff emphasized the importance for the research team to avoid focusing solely on conducting research. They suggest that the research team can contribute more effectively and with a longer-term impact to the partnership by having an eye toward improving the program to better serve children and families. One suggestion was to build a well-rounded research team that includes individuals with strong research skills and those with a strong policy perspective.

Sustaining the partnership requires ongoing funding. While partners may be able to do some small activities without funding (e.g., short-term planning, writing a grant), larger activities likely require sustained financial support. Researchers in external organizations may need some fiscal support for their time. The extent to which funding is required may vary from organization to organization (e.g., service-oriented universities may provide more support for faculty to work with state agencies), but funding is important in sustaining partnerships long-term. Each partner may be able to bring resources to the partnership. State agencies, for instance, could allocate a portion of their budget for research and provide in-kind support by releasing staff from current duties to work on research projects. Researchers could receive grant funding to support their work with state agency staff.

Finally, both agency staff and researchers highlighted the importance of recognizing that a strong research partnership can only be built over time. Not only does it take time for each partner to understand the other's needs, but the research also needs time to be completed. Partners noted the value of taking time to develop trust. They also noted the importance of having realistic expectations about the amount of time needed to complete a research project, particularly if the external research partner needs to access state administrative data.

Considerations

The three state agency research partnerships highlighted here have demonstrated the opportunities possible when using administrative data to address questions of shared interest. By working together over time, they have been able to address a wide range of questions about early care and education (e.g., licensing, pre-K, quality, child care subsidies, workforce). These partnerships have strengthened the administrative data collected by state agencies, increased staff research capacity, provided data to inform decision making, and shared their work to inform the larger field.

We offer some advice to those interested in establishing or maintaining a partnership between state agency staff and researchers.

Start small. These partnerships each started small, with one grant, one project, or one hire. This is key advice for those interested in establishing a long-term partnership. Although members of the partnership may have a large vision for what might be possible, begin with something manageable. Once the partnership is established and has successfully completed a small project, then it may become useful to consider larger projects.

Ask a “burning question.” State agency staff must often carry out their regular duties of overseeing programs while also helping with research. As noted by partnership members, it takes time from staff and researchers to conduct a research project with administrative data. Prioritizing time is easier when everyone involved, especially state agency staff, are eager to answer a pressing question.

Invest in the partnership. Although partnership members noted the importance of financial support, they also described other ways to invest in the partnership. Regular communication among key partners is needed to ensure that the partnership is effective and efficient. Work to ensure that each member benefits from the partnership. Talk about how the partnership can be helpful to its members and consider partnership activities beyond the analysis of administrative data (e.g., help the agency respond to a legislative request or allow graduate students to attend a meeting to learn how the agency uses data to make decisions).

Administrative Data Resources

King, C. & Maxwell, K. (2017). *Early Childhood Data Definitions: A Guide for Researchers Using Administrative Data*. OPRE Research Brief # 2017-67. Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

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